

Counteracting Courtship Speculation

The following letter was written to address the negative affects of others openly speculating on who is a potential match for a man's daughter...

Dear brothers,

I am writing to let you know of a situation we have just been through that has caused us a wee bit of discomfort. My aim is to help us all learn from it and to make it easier for each one of us as we seek to lead our families. The particular matter concerns children who are of courtship age and the role of the congregation in that environment.

Recently we have had quite of few families filing through our house (or guest house) checking out the church and the area. Some of these have returned more than once. And some have sons who are of courtship age. This has led to open speculation about the potential of a match between my oldest daughter and one of these young men. I am aware of at least three instances that illustrate my concern: (1) We heard second hand about how one member of the congregation asked a contact in another city if they knew if there was anything brewing between Sarah and a certain young man. (2) Another member told Sarah outright that they thought Sarah and so and so would be a good match. (3) Another member has asked Pam repeatedly if anything is brewing with Sarah, or some such question.

Now please understand that I am not writing to chide or complain, though I do think we need more care. This whole courtship phase of life is new to all of us and we will all be learning what to do and what not to do. So there is no need for apologies or explanations. We are confident of the good will of each one of you and know that your intentions are only for the good of our family and Sarah in particular. To the extent there have been any missteps on anyone's part, we have already extended the same grace we ourselves are shown by you for our own many blunders.

But you should know that Sarah was placed in a very awkward position as a result of the recent speculation. The one guest family was in our home checking out property again last week and Sarah had great difficulty relating naturally to the young man with whom others were trying to match her up! You see, she should never be placed in a position where she has to be self-conscious about her relationships with young men. She is not the one who will decide whom she should court. I am. So she should not have to deal with matters of who is or is not a "prospect" for her.

I see similarities between what has happened recently and the whole "boyfriend/girlfriend" syndrome we are all trying to escape. The world busies itself with twitter about who likes whom and who would be a good match, etc.

The courtship model removes the issue from the plane of public speculation (and hence degradation) and places it squarely in the father's lap (along with his wife). He is the one who should be examining potential prospects in the quiet counsels of his own choosing, unhindered by the well-intentioned conjectures of others. (This does not mean that others should not offer him counsel in private and even suggest potential matches; but this should be done confidentially and in a way that would guard against creating public discussion.)

Consider what happens when someone innocently speculates, say, about Sarah and some young man. If there is nothing really happening, then she is made to feel very uncomfortable, knowing that others are matching her up with someone, and her relationship with young men (at least the one mentioned) is made awkward. She is also thereby encouraged to start thinking about a relationship with a particular young man; this undermines my ability to guard her heart from any premature attachment to a man. If, on the other hand, there were genuine consideration of a potential courtship in process, she would not know about it anyway in the early stages, and my ability to conduct my evaluation would be hindered by the open speculation. There is just no constructive reason for anyone else to be talking to anyone but me about potential alliances involving my children (except for the kind of private speculation that any husband and wife may engage in between themselves on almost any subject).

My purpose in writing all this is to help us all think through how to handle the process of taking an eligible young person from pre-courtship to courtship and betrothal to marriage. We will all be facing this, some of us many times over. My main aim is to try to nip in the bud any tendency to undermine a wholesome process with idle and inappropriate words. Our courtship model will require freedom for fathers to be constantly evaluating young men and women for their sons and daughters. We will need to regard it as natural that families spend time together, even perhaps for the explicit purpose of evaluating potential matches, without adding the burden of a backdrop of open speculation within the community. Prior to an announced courtship relationship, we will need to carefully keep our speculations to ourselves so that fathers can proceed with their task unhindered and so that children are not placed in awkward positions.

As in so many other areas, a good rule of thumb would be that any questions, suggestions, or discussion about potential matches take place father to father in private. The community does indeed have an interest in the matches its youth may make, but the sanctity and delicacy of the process requires an extra measure of care, lest we unintentionally degrade the process. Private prayer or private counsel with the father would be in order; other discussion among ourselves would seem to me to not be in order.

Please feel free to respond to me about the content of this letter, though I'm not expecting any response. I just thought it would be helpful to share a real situation that can help us all think through issues we will all have to deal with,

and I would welcome dialog among us.

Again, I hope no one will worry about anything they may have said or done. My purpose is not to correct anyone. It is simply to help us all learn together as we pass down a new path.

Obviously I think it would be helpful if you share this letter with your wives, or at least pass on the heart of my concerns.

In the bonds of Christ,

<the young woman's father>
